

Parents ITSUKA

SpiritNo.10
AstralDress-PrincessType Weapon-ThroneType[Sandalphon]

橘公司

The author
Koushi Tachibana

11.5

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*Date A Live Volume 11.5
– Itsuka Parents*

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Date A Live Volume 11.5 – Itsuka Parents

“...Wow, it’s really crowded in here.”

On a certain winter day, Shidou went to a department store located within the city by himself. The promotional section of the eleventh floor, where Shidou was currently on, was holding an exclusive, limited-time exhibition for various Hokkaido-imported products. Freshly farmed local food ingredients, which constituted a rare sight, and delicious-looking, sweet snacks were neatly arranged together, ready for sale. Of course, the people who treated this particular event as their primary objective were in excessive abundance, filling the entire store to the brim with overflowing customers.

Without a doubt, Shidou’s goal was also this very event. Having learnt about the existence of the recent exhibition, which was starting to resemble a bustling marketplace, Shidou had travelled all the way to the department store on foot for the sake of purchasing the materials for tonight’s dinner.

“It’s not like I can get hold of this many fish and crustaceans every day... I’ll make seafood-don, I guess. Everyone’s present today too.”

Shidou thought aloud while counting the number of portions required with his fingers.

It was as he had said. Due to today being a rest day, the Spirits were presently staying at the Itsuka residence, patiently awaiting Shidou’s return.

There were currently seven people at his home: Tohka, Yoshino, Kaguya, Yuzuru, Miku, Natsumi, and Origami. As for Kotori, being the commander of Ratatoskr, she had to leave for work-related purposes but should come back before dinner time later.

“This amount should be enough if I count that way. Nine portions... no, Tohka can eat at least three people’s worth, so it should be eleven portions.”

In the end, what began as a quantity which he could habitually carry in the past became an unbearable weight in Shidou’s hands. If only there was

someone willing to lend a helping hand. well , asking for assistance when he hadn't even given his best would be outright overthinking the problem. Some things are better left as they are.

Shidou lightly forced a smile and advanced towards the fresh food counter while carrying his shopping basket.

At that moment...

“Eh...?”

The unexpected ringing of Shidou’s cellphone in his pocket made him stop in his tracks. He thought that the call must have come from one of the Spirits at home.

However, the truth blatantly refuted Shidou’s assumption. The screen displayed the following message:

『 Unknown Number 』

“...Who could it be now?”

Although the entire thing felt rather suspicious, Shidou still tapped the accept icon and received the anonymous call.

“Hello?”

A vague, unclear voice then resounded from the other end of the call .

『Your daughter has fallen into my hands. If you want her back, prepare a hundred million yen by tomorrow. 』

Shidou was momentarily stunned by the unforeseen statement.

“H-Huh?”

『This isn’t some joke. I’ll let you listen to her voice now. 』

『Hyaaa—save me, daddy! 』

From within the device, came a rigid lament which seemed to be fake at first glance.

“.....”

After hearing that voice, Shidou couldn’t help but heave a deep sigh of relief.

"You even used a foreign number to call me... What's the matter, Mom, Dad?"

『Ara, we've been found out.』

As Shidou finished speaking, a voice that was noticeably sharper than before could be clearly heard from the opposite end.

On the other end of the phone were his dear parents, who were currently on an overseas trip, Itsuka Tatsuo and Itsuka Haruko. Incidentally, Haruko had played the part of the kidnapper whereas Tatsuo had acted as the daughter - a downright terrible assignment of character roles.

"You haven't contacted me in a long time, and this is what you do at the first opportunity..."

『Sorry, sorry, we were too busy with all the work. Aah, it really is Shii-kun, uncovering us in an instant.』

"Please stop calling me Shii-kun... Anyway, what did you call me for?"

『What, do I need a reason to call my son?』

『Sad, truly sad. Dad is on the verge of crying. Huhuhu~.』

"...I'm hanging up."

『Ah—wait a moment. You haven't changed much, huh? Always so serious.』

『Exactly. If it were Kotori, she would innocently be surprised.』

Even after talking, they had collectively placed their mouths near the microphone and added a {Niii——}. This married couple was as full of rejuvenating energy as ever.

"That's why..."

『Oh, that's right. I almost forgot. Where do you think we are right now?』

"Even if you ask me... The United States? Heading out from the main office..."

『Hehe, wrong! Right to answer revoked! Here, Tatsu-kun.』

『Tengu City of Eastern Kyoto, also known as Eastern Tengu! In front of the door to our lovely and nostalgic house!』

『*pinpon* Correct! Tatsu-kun gets one hundred million points!』

『Nice! Can you allow me to buy a laptop with one hundred million points!?』

『That would require ten billion points.』

『Evil!』

“Ha...?”

All kinds of information turbulenty surged forth like raging billows, and Shidou's eyes diminished into tiny dots. However, the two on the other side of the call did not take note of his circumstances and continued to chat about their previous topic unaffectedly.

『In other words, we're back! well , only for the short holidays. We have to hurry back sooner or later.』

『Ah, it's been a long time since I last saw Kotori and you. Is everything fine? 』

“W-Wait a minute!”

Shidou abruptly gave out a loud wail, causing the passers-by around him to glance at his direction with astonished expressions. Yet, Shidou did not have the leisure to care about the gazes of others anymore.

In brief, his father and mother had just stated that they were in front of the door to the Itsuka residence. —In front of where the Spirits were staying and taking care of things; that Itsuka residence.

『Eh? What's wrong?』

“N-Nothing... It's just that I'm outside buying some groceries, so I'm not at home!

Kotori isn't there too...”

『Ara, I see. Good timing, did you buy enough for our dinners as well ? Shii-kun's cooking, I can't wait! 』

“I-I wasn't talking about that! Anyway, can you pass the time somewhere outside for a little bit before I come back?”

『Eh, why? It's fine if we stay at home.』

“Kuh... T-There are reasons, so please!”

Listening to Shidou’s begging pleas, Haruko let out some unconvinced, evil laughter.

『Tatsu-kun, Shii-kun seems to have hidden something suspicious at home when we weren’t here. Let’s do a careful search of the house.』

『Agreed!』

“D-DOOON’T!!!”

The state of affairs took a turn for the worse instead, causing Shidou to immediately verbalize an ear-piercing screech.

『Un, it’s settled then, we will leave dinner to you. As for the menu, perhaps it will broaden after discovering Shii-kun’s precious treasure? Mommy will have Sichuan crabs.』

『Ah, Daddy wants sea urchins.』

After leaving behind their respective orders as if they had known that Shidou would be going to the Hokkaido products fair, the phone call was hung up.

Shidou, whose face was now ghastly pale, hastily operated his cellphone in a flurry to give Tohka and the others a call . Nonetheless, presumably due to the fact that he had forgotten to charge the battery during the previous night, the screen of his phone darkened in a flash just as Shidou pressed on the “call key”. What bad timing.

“Why now of all times!?”

The dire situation which Shidou had found himself in would only deteriorate further if this went on. Deteriorate extremely; it was already past the point of being able to trust the house to their son, who had brought home a number of unfamiliar girls without their knowledge or permission. It was to the extent that they would decide to hold a family meeting. No matter how carefree Shidou’s parents were, there was no way that he could obtain their forgiveness by treating them to dinner alone.

But excluding the utilization of crabs and sea urchins, Shidou could only think of relying on privacy reasons to oppress their mouths.

“I need to get back fast...!”

The longer he delayed, the worse his condition became. Perhaps it was already too late to prevent his father and mother from coming into contact with the Spirits, although Shidou still needed to rush home as early as possible before a life and death situation arose from their confrontation. He exerted renewed determination into his body and pushed away all the other customers in his path while dashing towards the exit.

Despite knowing that his efforts were utterly futile, Shidou did not forget to load the crabs and sea diligently into his shopping basket so that he would later be prepared for any imaginable eventuality.



“Uuuu... One more time, Origami.”

Sitting in the living room of the Itsuka residence with a video game controller in hand, Tohka shouted aloud enthusiastically. She was a young girl who possessed characteristically unique features, including long dark hair and crystalline pupils.

Nevertheless, her regular face was often distorted and twisted nowadays due to profound regret.

The reason was simple. On the monitor before Tohka’s eyes, a fallen avatar and the characters {K.O.!} were glimmering intermittently.

“The result is the same no matter how many times you try.”

The person who had replied was the girl sitting beside Tohka, Tobiichi Origami. At the moment, she was attentively staring at the screen with a relaxed expression that was the complete opposite of Tohka’s demeanor.

Overall score - five losses out of five battles. Originally, Tohka had only decided to swap places with the Yamai sisters after witnessing them play and

thinking that it would be quite amusing to have a go. Yet ever since she started the game, Tohka had been repeatedly defeated and toyed with by Origami using her superb techniques over and over again, unable to seize even a single victory.

Seeing the two of them compete with each other emulously in a rather one-sided battle, Kaguya spoke from behind their backs.

“Kaka, worthy of thy standing indeed, Origami. Verily I must not brush aside my kin’s sufferance. The time hast arrived for this me to be your adversary.”

“Criticism. Kaguya cannot even win against Yuzuru.”

Sitting next to her twin sister, Yuzuru said so with an underweening puff. In response, Kaguya then yelled in an unsatisfied tone.

“T-That means of subjugation is unacceptable! Not in the least elegant!”

“Denial. A win is a win. Kaguya only requires observing herself being slaughtered until she becomes enraged with irritation.”

“U-Uguuu...”

Kaguya bitterly groaned with remorse. In reality, even if it was the chess game in which she was a grandmaster, the times where she had the tables turned against her through a magnificent counterattack accounted for the vast majority.

“E-Everyone... Please get along more...”

“Games are supposed to be for having fun!”

From behind the Yamai sisters, Yoshino’s frail voice could be heard along with the ventriloquism of the rabbit puppet, Yoshinon, which Yoshino had mounted on her left hand. At the rear of the living room, Yoshino, Natsumi, and Miku were watching the gaming group’s intensifying showdown together while gracefully sipping black tea.

“Right, relationships come first. Just like Natsumi-chan and me!”

“...There’s nothing between us. Speaking of which, why are you getting closer to me little by little? It’s creepy.”

"Eh? I'm not closing the distance or anything. If you had felt something like that, it must've been an illusion. In Natsumi-chan's heart, my existence is becoming more and more significant!"

"...Uh, that, anyway, can you remove your hand that's attached to my knee? Also stop wriggling your fingers every now and then."

Miku and Natsumi thus began the attack and defense war between them.

Although she had gained awareness of the combat occurring on the other side, her own battle took precedence within her train of thought. Tohka shook her head and issued a declaration in a loud voice.

"Alright, I won't stop until I vanquish you! Time for the tiebreaker, Ori—"

However, Tohka's war cry halted midway. Her ears seemed to have detected some sort of suspicious sound.

"—?"

With Origami leading in front, everybody else gradually noticed the oddity and suspended their dialogues while pricking their ears up.

"...This sound is..."

"It's coming from the front door... I think. Has Shidou-san or Kotori-san returned...?"

"No, these footsteps don't match any of theirs."

"Un. So, is it a guest?"

"Hmph, they would press the doorbell if they were so."

"Assent. In other words—"

"—Burglars."

Origami's statement caused the Spirits to catch their breaths altogether.

"I-It can't be, doing something so bold in broad daylight..."

"They could be bandits too. In short, somebody other than Shidou or Kotori has intruded into this house without pressing the doorbel . That's a certain fact."

“W-What should we do...”

Yoshino softly enquired, her voice flustered with fright. But Origami only remained silent and gazed at the connector door which linked the entrance with the living room.

“.....”



“I’m not sure why, but I feel there’s a sense of reminiscence even though this place is ours.”

“Ah, yeah.”

Standing at the entrance to the Itsuka residence, Haruko and Tatsuo said so while sighing with considerable emotion.

Short hair, powerful-looking pointed eyebrows, and a pair of red pupils. Always disagreeing with Rrations and having a broad stance, the wife Haruko was the counterpart of her husband Tatsuo, the person who was always smiling under his dark green glasses and had a distinguishing hunchbacked posture.

Having lived together for a long period of time, a husband and wife couple’s appearances would resemble each other more and more. That may be so for other married couples, but it did not apply to the Itsukas at all. When they stood side by side, the two could be pictured as a female heroine and a civil official; an indulged young woman and an attendant; or a bridesmaid and groomsman who were invited to a wedding ceremony.

“Saa, let’s get inside.”

“Un, okay..... Ahh! Ouch!”

At that moment, Tatsuo accidentally treading a step over, and he toppled onto Haruko.

“Ahh... Yaa!”

As a result, Tatsuo's head was buried directly into Haruko's bosom, which had turned around after being startled. It was simply a clichéd occurrence distinctive to manga and anime alike. Haruko hanged her shoulders down and deliberately sighed.

"...Really, you're just like how you used to be."

"S-Sorry..."

"It can't be helped. I'm already used to it too. If I were the old me, I would flatten you in an instant."

"Uuuu... the memories of being crazily beaten up in the past."

Tatsuo then apologized as he up righted his posture. He was always like that in the past. Haruko made a wry smile and steadily extended her hand towards the door knob.

"Alright. The earlier we... Hm, ara?"

In that instant, Haruko subconsciously inclined her head.

"What's wrong?"

"The house is supposed to be empty. But the lock here is open."



"Heh... That's exceptionally rare considering it's the diligent Shidou we're talking about here."

"Un... Even if the public security in Japan is very good, this is way too thoughtless.

Proper care must be taken."

The two conversed so and leisurely passed through the front door. However, contrary to their expectations, Haruko discovered another questionable aspect and wrinkled her brows. On the porch, there laid a considerable number of female shoes tidily placed together.

"Seriously, are of these Koto-chan's? She bought so many when we weren't here... And we haven't even seen all these styles..."

"Ahaha, could it be that this was why Shidou didn't allow us to go inside?"

"Ah—, maybe. After all, Shii-kun has always had feelings for his adorable sister."

Haruko simultaneously expressed her annoyance and shrugged her shoulders while taking off her shoes and entering the house. Beside her, Tatsuo imitated her actions and stretched his body.

"Phew, home sweet home. The employee living quarters weren't that bad, but I'd rather stay at home more than anywhere else."

"I get what you're hinting at. We *are* Japanese people."

The couple heartily laughed like old times and opened the door leading to the living room.

—Just then.

"Heh?"

"Eh?"

Haruko and Tatsuo exclaimed at the exact same moment.

That could be considered to be a normal reaction. Just during the split second the couple stepped into the living room, it was already too late when they had noticed the several silhouettes which rapidly leaped out of the shadows and

onto them, subduing the couple while pinning them on the floor.

“W-Wha!? What in the world is going on!?”

“H-Haru! Are you alright!?”

In spite of their desperate struggle to kick their legs around, both of their hands had been firmly restrained, rendering the couple unable to move freely at all . The two painstakingly attempted to turn around in order to examine their attackers’

identities. Soon after that, however, Haruko experienced another shock. The culprits apprehending Tatsuo and her were two young girls; not only that, but their facial features were flawlessly identical - twins.

“Humph, resistance is futile.”

“Warning. Please cooperate.”

“W-Wha.....”

The sudden development of their state of affairs caused Haruko’s eyes to flicker in bursts of black and white. Cleverly concealed under the shade of the sofa, numerous teenage girls appeared one after another in quick succession. Moreover, they were eyeing the two of them with looks of suspicion.

“Um... so these are the burglars?”

“T-They don’t look like burglars to me...”

“You’re too naïve, Yoshino. Bad people don’t have the word *bad* written on their foreheads.”

As above, the girls discussed certain unclear or meaningless details.

The word *burglar* surfaced within Haruko’s mind in a split second. However, as she observed the appearances of the newly emerged girls, she was unable to harbor any notions towards that. well , perhaps it was as the girl on the left who bore a fierce expression had said: bad people don’t have the word *bad* written on their foreheads.

At that moment.

“—Guah!”

Just as Haruko began to get bogged down in confusion, Tatsuo's blood-curdling shriek came through behind her.

Turning around, only the figure of another girl could be seen walking out of the shadows. One hand was choking Tatsuo's neck, and the other was holding a small knife and pressing it against the side of Tatsuo's head.

"T-Tatsu-kun!"

"—Who are you people?"

The girl, whose expression remained unyielding, emotionlessly interrogated them with an ice-cold tone. Her stoic unyielding character caused Haruko to sharply inhale an out of the blue breath, sensing by instinct the dreadful terror which emanated from the girl. Judging from her natural movements, the girl appeared to be already accustomed to employing her pocketknife for purposes beyond mere *threats*.

"If you refuse to answer, I'll sever this man's fingers one by one."

"Hiii...!?"

"H-Hey, Origami..."

The girl's comrade furrowed her eyebrows squeamishly.

"There's no problem. Although it's a stale exaggeration, the results are still excellent. Pure pain is one thing, but the possibility of losing vital organs such as the fingers incites more fear when torturing someone."

"O-Origami...?"

"Furthermore, the effectiveness is increased when there are two people. If there is an intimate relationship between them, one victim may be unable to bear witnessing the other suffering in excruciating agony, and he will confess everything. Otherwise, if both do not share any faithful connection between them and one victim hears the other bemoaning his fate, he will infer that the same torment will be inflicted upon him, producing a similar effect."

"H-Hiiiii ——"

While the girl explained apathetically, her simple vociferation seemed to be extremely efficacious on Tatsuo as he quiveringly emitted a timid voice.

"I-I didn't mean it that way! I was just telling you not to overdo it!"

After listening to the purple-haired girl's words, the girl who was holding a knife in her hand let out a snort, beginning to ponder deeply.

"What you say makes some sense."

"D-Do you understand now?"

"True, compared to cutting the fingers off, I should peel the nails off first instead."

"How silly of me."

"You didn't understand at all !!?"

The purple-haired girl yelled at the knife-wielding girl, causing her to incline her head inconceivably.

"Then a truth serum?"

The other girls shook their heads in disbelief, face palming.

It looked as if the other girls had meant to adopt a more humanitarian, not to mention, legal method. At least, they weren't intending to kill Haruko if she didn't speak, or forcing her to give her bank credentials and so on. Haruko thoroughly strained her body and tried hard to squeeze her voice out of the depths her throat.

"I-I'd like to ask who in the world you people are...! What are you doing in someone else's house?!"

"What we're doing... looking after the place?"

The purple-haired girl gingerly slanted her head and replied so, as if it was plainly obvious.

Haruko felt like she had been treated as a fool. However, that soon proved to be incorrect. The instant she saw their genuine expressions, she could tell that they were not lying.

But if that were the case, what was that all about? Could Haruko have entered the wrong house?

This paradoxical thought flitted across Haruko's mind instantaneously, only to

be negated shortly afterwards. The living room in her field of vision was, without a doubt, a section of her house, the house which Haruko and Tatsuo had purchased using a 30-year loan, their beloved 『MY HOME』.

Of course, it would be a different matter if the neighbors had renovated an interior that was exactly alike to the hilt. But taking into consideration that this was not some sort of game, an unfortunate coincidence as such was utterly improbable.

“Looking after the place... I don’t remember ever asking someone to do that.”

“Hm? A conciliatory utterance.”

“Astonishment. We don’t remember ever being asked by you as well .”

The twins, who were detaining Haruko and Tatsuo, gave out their reply. Hearing their presumptuous and disconnected statements, Haruko broke into a fit of rage.

“What have you been discussing ever since before!? Entering other people’s houses without permission...”

Just as Haruko declared that, the girl who had been pressing a knife against Tatsuo suddenly widened her eyes as if she had finally realized something crucial.

“Muuu... What is it, Origami?”

“Could they be...?”

The girl called Origami swiftly sheathed her knife and fished out a cellphone from her pocket, beginning to operate the device.

Subsequently, she proceeded to shift Haruko and Tatsuo to the front and quickly alternated her line of sight between their faces and the screen of her phone. After confirming something, Origami got up and pried the twins’ hands open, releasing the restraints.

“W-What’s the matter?”

“Doubt. What’s wrong, Master Origami?”

The twins enquired in surprise, but Origami did not pay a shred of attention

and instead started to greet Haruko and Tatsuo gently.

“Are you alright? You can relax now, Oto-sama, Okaa-sama.”

“Hah...?”

“What did... you say...?”

Haruko’s and Tatsuo’s eyes gathered into a dot. If nothing else, the girl was now absolutely imperceptible to be one who would say distressing things such as cutting fingers, peeling nails, and so on.

Haruko was not the only one. The other girls also exhibited clueless expressions similar to the couple’s.

“Eh? Are they Origami’s parents?”

“But... aren’t Origami-san’s parents...”

“No.”

Origami lightly shook her head.

“These two... are Itsuka Tatsuo and Itsuka Haruko. They’re Shidou’s and Kotori’s parents.”

『.....!？』

Having heard Origami’s verification, the girls’ stunned faces turned into blank sheets of white.



“Ahh! Crap! Why did a traffic jam have to happen at this damn moment!?”

Shidou resignedly hauled the heavy shopping bag as he plodded along the way home.

He had previously planned to take public transportation and hurry back, but as luck would have it, a road accident had occurred somewhere during the

journey and blocked all the bus routes, leaving Shidou helplessly stranded. If he had continued waiting for the hindering obstructions to clear, he would have needed to waste an extensive amount of valuable time before eventually arriving at home. Shidou had no choice but to alight and depend on his two legs.

An encounter between the Spirits and his parents was already inevitable.

Nevertheless, the Spirits staying at the Itsuka residence were all kindhearted and well-behaved children. They would definitely acquaint themselves with his parents, no doubt about that. Surely they would not seize Shidou's parents and imperil them.

The most ideal outcome would be for his parents to somehow believe that the Spirits were Kotori's friends. Yet, Shidou was blithely unaware of what might become of such a mild scenario.

The one and only deed he could carry out now was to return home as early as possible while vigilantly keeping a lookout for the Spirits and his parents. In the worst case scenario, before the Spirits spouted some sort of confidential secret that could turn out to be severely fatal. The best Shidou could do was to divert the topic of conversation. Until then, he had to—

“.....?!”

Shidou abruptly ceased his actions.

As for why he suddenly did so, that was a normal maneuver when faced with a female who had tumbled over in front of him.

“A-Are you okay?”

“O-Ouch~, my ankle is sprained... Eh? Itsuka-kun?”

“Tama-chan? My mistake, Tama-sensei!”

Recognizing the woman's face, Shidou broadened his eyes wide and round. The female who had toppled onto the ground was Shidou's homeroom teacher, Okamine Tamae, generally called Tama-chan. Not only that, but she looked especially beautiful with her manner of dressing de nos jours, her make-up was unusually thick, and she was wearing unnaturally high-heeled shoes, which had

resulted in her fall at the beginning.1

“What are you doing in a place like this? And your attire...”

“Itsuka-kun!”

After only a little over half of Shidou’s words had been blurted out, Tama-chan immediately caught hold of his hands.

“Wa! W-What’s wrong!”

“P-Please, bring me to the Ni-chōme Union Buildings!” 2

“Eh?”

The blunt invitation caught Shidou off guard, eliciting an odd noise from the boy.

1. The postpositive adjective ‘de nos jours’ means current or relatively recent
2. **Shinjuku Ni-chōme** (新宿二丁目) refers to colloquially as Ni-chōme or simply Nichō, is an LGBT area in the Shinjuku District of the Shinjuku Special Ward of Tokyo, Japan.

“I-Is there something going on there?”

“A wedding ceremony!”

“I-I see...”

Tama-chan’s hell-bent aura raided him like a furious onslaught, forcing Shidou to retreat a step back.

“This party is restricted to men with annual incomes of more than eight million yen, so the competition is ultra-high! Since only women in their twenties are allowed entry, this is my last chance!! I can’t fail here! It would be a disservice to my comrades’

sacrifices!!!”

Tama-chan desperately implored while her watery eyes brimmed with tears.

Perspiration beaded atop Shidou’s forehead as he contemplated on how to break it to her.

“I’m sorry, but I have something really urgent right now...”

“...If you can’t bring me there, then I’ll just have to marry Itsuka-kun...”

“Guh...”

Tama-chan threateningly told Shidou using a dark, demonic voice, generating a cold chill which briskly travelled down his trembling spine like a bat out of hell.

From their present location, the Union Buildings were approximately a ten-minute walk in the opposite direction of the Itsuka residence. Every time he thought of his parents soon engaging the Spirits, Shidou deemed that the slight detour would only serve to squander even more time in vain.

However, he simply could not leave her in that pitiful state. Shidou uttered a loud cry and piggybacked Tama-chan.



“...Mine ears catch the susurrations of purgatorial spectres...”

Kaguya harped on while drenched in cold sweat. Although everyone else was unable to make any meaningful sense of that bizarre verse of hers, they all knew it signified that they had done something disastrously appalling and atrocious.

Despite whatever the phrase implicitly meant, that was the unanimous thought continuously reiterating within the Spirits’ heads.

Now, Tohka and the others were hiding in the shadow of the bar and secretly holding a meeting. Their expressions were also identical - full of guilt and repentance.

But that was a matter of course. Even if they had been completely uninformed, the Spirits had put Shidou’s and Kotori’s parents in terribly sore straits.

“I had no idea that Shidou’s parents had came home...”

“If I recall correctly... weren’t they on a trip overseas?”

『Yup yup. I think they were working in some electronic industry?』

In response to Tohka’s sentence, Yoshino and Yoshinon nodded their heads in agreement.

“Hm~... and apprehending them on first sight, how awful~.”

Miku supported her chin with her finger and commented so. Almost straight away, the Yamai sisters, who had been the ones to subdue the couple, invariably exposed a restless countenance on their ashen faces.

“T-Tis damnation, we are curséd! A scarce prospect overexerted with overconfident CQC...” 1

“Approval. In addition to subduing them with a method utilized for suppressing armed opponents.”

A dejected look resurfaced on Kaguya’s and Yuzuru’s faces as they finished speaking. What they had executed was indeed very exquisite and unique, undeniably the culmination of intense training and practice. The contest this time had probably been capture techniques.

Hearing the twins confess, Origami closed her eyes and gently swayed her head.

“Kaguya and Yuzuru have committed an unforgivable act. They have left a bottomless scar in the Itsukas’ hearts.”

“O-Off with my head...”

“Reticence. What ought we to do...?”

1. CQC stands for close quarters combat

“No, even the gravest trauma cannot compare to what you did...”

Natsumi gazed in Origami’s direction with a half-glance and said so. The other Spirits issued numerous interjections of ‘uh-huh’ in endorsement.

“This isn’t the time for blaming each other.”

“Um, I didn’t mean to point fingers...”

Although Natsumi had intended to speak out more of her opinion, she decided that it was uncalled for, bearing their situation in mind.

“Seriously though, what kind of aftermath have we created?”

Tohka asked as a disturbed look emerged on her face. Natsumi replied in a sophisticated manner.

“...Well , since they’re Shidou’s parents, they are the owners of this house. If we’ve enraged them, don’t hope to even take a step in this place like we used to anymore.”

“H-How can this be!”

“That’s not the end of it. If they tell Shidou and Kotori *Never see those ruffians ever again.....*”

“.....!”

“Forgive me, everyone... but I can’t get along with people who would use violence against my parents.”

“A-Ahh...”

In spite of Natsumi having a tendency of mentioning excessively negative things, Tohka still couldn’t help but utter a sad lament.

“I-I don’t want that! What should we do!?”

Miku complacently crossed her arms as she listened to Tohka’s sorry plight.

“—I have an idea~.”

“Y-You do?”

Miku nodded her head a few times to show affirmation.

“Our first impression on Darling’s parents, though quite regrettably, is undoubtedly the worst. Even so, if we leave better impressions in the future, won’t everything work out then?”

“B-Better impressions...?”

『How, specifically?』

Yoshino and Yoshinon racked their brains while probing. In reply, Miku raised a finger and answered.

“In a nutshell , a Japanese-style welcoming.”

“W-Welcoming?”

“Correct. Father and mother had undergone a long-distance flight, so they must be exhausted. If we bring them the best welcoming possible from our hearts, we can surely increase our reputations in their hearts.”

Absorbing Miku’s speech, a new ray of hope sparkled within the Spirits’ eyes.

“Alright, let’s do this!”

“M-Me too...”

『Yoshinon too!』

“Kuku... not bad. I’ll let you experience my infernal welcoming finesse!”

“Consent. Leave it to Yuzuru.”

“Um, I’m fine with anything... if that’s what everyone wants.”

“No objections.”

After confirming everybody’s acknowledgement, Miku gestured with her head.

“It’s happily decided then. In that case—let our battle begin!”



“.....”

“T-Tatsu-kun, are you okay?”

“What about you? Do your arms hurt?”

Haruko and Tatsuo were mutually confirming the other's safety in quiet whispers.

The couple, who had just been liberated a few moments ago, were sitting together on the living room sofa, albeit with still tense nerves.

However, their utter inability to loosen their fatigue could not be helped. After all, the mysterious girls, who were forcefully occupying their house, were currently hiding themselves behind the counter and discussing covert matters.

“Those girls... where did they come from?”

Tatsuo said so with a perplexed expression.

“They appear to be Shidou’s and Kotori’s friends... what relationship do they have though?”

“Ordinary friends, I guess? Maybe Shidou asked them to look after the house, and we happened to be back. They had probably mistaken us to be burglars and captured us...”

“...Do you really think that girls nowadays would undergo military hand-to-hand combat practice, be skilled in manipulating knives, and even have knowledge of interrogation torture techniques? Those girls are obviously not your typical kids.”

“Well , that’s true. They don’t look so bad to me...”

Towards Tatsuo’s blissfully ignorant statement, Haruko could only shake her head.

Without any sense of danger like always. Although he was an outstanding engineer, Tatsuo could be said to be totally incompatible with society and

oblivious to humankind's malice. In brief, he was a super goody two shoes. As a matter of fact, if Haruko had not held him back, Tatsuo would have been swindled countless of times.

Well , she did find this aspect of him to be exceptionally cute.

"...Anyway, it's too risky to stay here any longer. We should find an opportunity to escape."

"Hm, if Haru says so."

Tatsuo mumbled, still unsuspecting.

"Good. Let's try to slip away as quietly as possible."

Haruko and Tatsuo arched their backs in an effort to minimise the sounds of their footsteps and tiptoed towards the corridor.

However, at that moment.

"—It's done!"

Just when the couple was on the other side of the counter—a clamorous shout reverberated from the kitchen, and a girl simultaneously approached them while carrying a huge plate in her hands.

Afterwards, when the girl pushed open the door and looked towards the two, she was dumbfounded and tilted her head.

"Muu? What's wrong, Shidou's mommy and daddy? Are you two going anywhere?"

"Ahh, un. We were escap—"

"N-No, nothing! Just doing some light exercises!"

Haruko amplified the volume of her voice in order to enfold Tatsuo's overly honest answer. Although honesty is the best policy, this particular principle being Haruko's favorite, now was not the time for manners or etiquette. If their plans had been exposed, who knows what would happen to them.

"Muu, is that so?"

Nonetheless, the other party seemed to be as innocent as Tatsuo, as if she completely trusted Haruko's improvised fabrication.

“So... about that.”

“My name is Tohka. Yatogami Tohka.”

“Tohka-chan, is something wrong?”

Tohka strongly nodded with an ‘Umu!’ and placed the large dish on the table.

“I heard that if I make these myself, you’ll be very welcomed and happy. You two must be hungry after a long trip! Please feel free to eat these!”

Tohka motioned towards the plentiful items on the plate. Haruko and Tatsuo could only follow with surprised expressions.

“These are... handmade onigiri?”¹

Even though they were somewhat out of shape, those were certainly handmade rice-balls - warm cooked rice moulded into a triangle and wrapped with dried seaweed.

On the contrary, beads of sweat gradually dripped from Haruko’s face. The reason was straightforward. Each of these handmade onigiris couldn’t even be held on a fully spread palm. They were extra-large-sized onigiris.

“Please, don’t be shy!”

Tohka urged them as she covered her face with a sunny smile. Haruko forced a grin as her face convulsed slightly.

Then, the completely contrasting counterpart of hers, Tatsuo, readily put his palms together.

“Aah, thanks for your troubles. Let’s eat—”

“Wait, Tatsu-kun.”

“Eh? What’s the matter, Haru?”

Tatsuo was bewildered at the sudden warning. Although Haruko felt that his reaction was a bit adorable, her personal opinion didn’t take precedence over their predicament. Haruko edged closer towards Tatsuo’s ears so that her voice would be inaudible to Tohka.

“We haven’t figured out who these girls are yet, let alone what could be inside this onigiri. Eating this without any prior caution is extremely dangerous.”

"Goodness, aren't you overthinking it? This girl doesn't look that bad either, and it wouldn't be polite to refuse something she has offered."

1. Onigiri (お握り) a Japanese food made from white rice formed into triangular or cylinder shapes and often wrapped in *nori* (seaweed).

"No, that's... Nnn, true."

Haruko attempted to refute her husband's courtesy but immediately swallowed her rebuttal back down her throat. Above all, having been a couple for so many years, she knew well about the headstrong Tatsuo's stubbornness when it came to these things.

"I understand. But I get the first bite, okay?"

Haruko demanded unyieldingly. It wasn't to ensure that the food was safely edible, but to protect Tatsuo since she thought that if he were to taste first, he would gobble it down in a single mouthful even if something inside had tasted fishy.

Tatsuo smiled as if he didn't know the slightest bit about Haruko's intentions.

"Oh, so you wanted to pick first? I guess that part of you is cute too, Haru. Sure, go ahead."

"Un... Thanks, Tatsu-kun."

A feeble feeling of helplessness interwove with a distant joy of being praised as *cute*, causing Haruko to expose a complicated smile.

Haruko lightly coughed once in order to retrieve the atmosphere and turned her body towards Tohka.

"Well, if you don't mind, Tohka-chan."

"Umu! Here you go!"

Tohka prompted with sheer vigour. Haruko gulped down her saliva out of nervousness instead of appetite and extended her hands to grasp one of the onigiris laid out in front of her. For the sake of affirming its contents, Haruko gently pried the rice-ball open from the middle.

"This is... bonito, cod, tuna... uh, and a big heap of et cetera."

"Umu! I didn't know which one to use, so I put everything in! Ah, but don't worry. I didn't put any plums, because those are... um, sour."

Tohka assumed a bitter expression as if she had sampled something acidic. It was as Tatsuo had stated - 'This girl doesn't look that bad.'

Be that as it may, they must not be negligent in regard to precautionary measures.

Haruko took a sniff of the onigiri's savoury fragrance with her nose to guarantee that there were no foreign odors, and she took a bite of it afterwards.

"...Tastes like... a normal onigiri."

"How is it?"

"Un, d-delicious."

Receiving Haruko's thumbs up, Tohka's face brightened cheerfully.

"really!? There's more to come! Please eat up!"

"Thanks. In that case, don't mind if I do."

Tatsuo lunged at the remaining onigiris on the plate and snatched one, munching on it in massive bites.

"Wow, yummy! You're really good at cooking, Tohka-chan!"

Tatsuo praised her as he devoured the rice-ball without any regard for its gigantic size.

In reality, due to the fact that they had only eaten breakfast that morning, their deprived stomachs had already been starving. Haruko mirrored Tatsuo and chewed on the onigiri for the second time, and then for a third time.

However, no matter how empty their bellies were, there had to be a limit. Tohka had made a total of six onigiris. The onigiris, which were enormous enough to cover their entire faces, were divided equally between the two - three each. There was clearly no way to finish them. Tatsuo, having eaten one whole piece, and Haruko, who had eaten half of a piece, were already stuffed.

"Hu... Thanks for the meal."

“...?!”

In response to Haruko’s resigned words, Tohka instantly widened her eyes and her expression disheartened.

“I-I see... you’re full already... Umu, I can’t do anything about that...”

『Uu...』

Seeing Tohka’s depressed state, both Haruko and Tatsuo oppressed their breaths suffocatingly. Catching sight of her melancholy served to stimulate the abominable sensation as if Haruko and Tatsuo had done an unspeakable misdeed of sorts towards the girl.

“N-No, that... I think we can eat a bit more, can’t we?”

“Ahaha... yeah. There’s still some room left.”

“...!”

Tohka released an elated, glad grin the moment she heard the couple’s decisions. If she had seen the truth behind their sugarcoated words, Tohka’s heart would be devastated once again and torn to shreds.

“really? Umu! If so, um, how should I put it, I’m really happy!”

“...”

Now that it had been said, it couldn’t be undone. Haruko and Tatsuo respectively forced a wry smile and began to eat the onigiris on the plate for a second time.

—Thus, ten minutes later.

“Ugh, phew...”

“Fuh...”

Despite their reluctant efforts to force themselves to keep consuming the food, their stomachs had already reached their extreme maximums no matter how they insisted on defying the laws of nature. In the end, Haruko and Tatsuo managed to finish two and a half rice-balls altogether and finally collapsed onto the sofa as they reached their utmost breaking point.

“Shidou’s mommy and daddy! Are you okay!?”

Tohka anxiously watched the couple, but to no avail as Haruko and Tatsuo had exhausted every single ounce of their energy to the point that they were unable to even wave their hands anymore.



“We made it in time... I’m really grateful, Itsuka-kun. If I can get a rich guy to be my husband, I’ll invite you to our house for a visit.”

“T-There’s no need for that. You’re welcome.”

Shidou earnestly declined the goodwil of Tama-chan, whom he had carried all the way to the party spot. He hurriedly bowed his head and began another sprint along the road.

He had spent more time than he had originally anticipated, so Shidou had to rush.

“Please behave properly everyone...”

Shidou divulged a sorrowful wish while treading on the path at the same time.

However, at that moment, the signal light on the roadside became red, and Shidou could only stomp his foot anxiously while he waited for the lamp to change color.

Coincidentally.

“Oh, Itsuka. What are you doing here?”

A certain voice reached his ears from behind. Shidou looked back, merely to find his classmate, Tonomachi Hiroto, standing there and waving to him.

“Chi.” 1

“What’s with that reply...”

“...Ah never mind. I had just carelessly displayed my real thoughts.”

“Could you at least be perfunctory or tell some lie?!”

Tonomachi roasted Shidou for his blatancy, yet dialogues like these were already commonplace between the two friends. Tonomachi shrugged his shoulders and flung his chin aside.

"Forget it. Good timing, could you accompany me for a quick walk if you're free right now? I wanna go see some new arcade that just opened."

"Sorry, but not today. I have something important going on."

"What?"

1. A tongue clicking noise that indicates frustration of annoiance.

Shidou instantly bolted away the moment the signal lamp turned green. Or at least, he tried to. In that split second, his arm was unexpectedly gripped by Tonomachi, and Shidou was forced to stop in his tracks.

"H-Hey, what's the big idea? I'm in a hurry."

"Something important? Could that have something to do with a girl?"

"...Nope."

"As if! Then why are you stuttering all of a sudden!? Don't lie to me, why does this kind of thing always happen to you!"

"H-How am I supposed to know?! Let me go already! I'm running out of time!"

"Not in a million years. You'll be spending a day void of any girls with me!"

"What the hell is wrong with this day!!!"

Against the three-times-as-annoying-as-usual Tonomachi, Shidou could only curse and utter profanities at his unlucky fate.



“Uu... that was going a bit overboard.”

“Haha... we’ll be able to eat more in the future.”

Haruko and Tatsuo, who had fainted owing to ingesting too much food, were currently lying flat on the bed located in their bedroom.

Speaking of which, the onigiris of which the two had not been endowed with the capacity to partake had been cleanly finished off by Tohka in the blink of an eye. The reason why she had shown a dispirited expression was revealed to be rationally pardonable. Conforming to her standards and criteria, Haruko and Tatsuo had only eaten a meagre helping of onigiris and coldly left the remaining untouched.

“A-Are you okay, um, Shidou’s mommy and daddy?”

“Forcing oneself is detrimental...”

In the course of their rest, another person’s voice resounded from beside the couple.

Shifting their line of sight allowed them to see two girls with petite and delicate figures standing there.

One of the girls had a rabbit puppet draped over her hand; she appeared to be especially amicable. The other girl, however, displayed an unaffectionate expression and boldly stared at the couple with unhappy, displeased eyes.

If memory served them right, their names were—Yoshino and Natsumi. Previously, these two had substituted with Tohka and carried Haruko and Tatsuo to the bedroom.

“...Ahh, I’m fine.”

“Un, we just ate a bit too much.”

Hearing Haruko's and Tatsuo's replies, the two girls exhaled a breath.

Discerning the two's appearances, Haruko's formerly taut nerves slightly slackened.

The girls were as Tatsuo had said - not bad people.

"Yoshino-chan and Natsumi-chan, right? Are you two friends with Koto-chan, no, Kotori?"

Yoshino and Natsumi gave off a rather ambiguous tone and answered in low voices after perceiving Haruko's question.

"Yes... Kotori has taken care of us ever since before."

"Ooh, really? Then, where is that girl now? Even if you're very close friends, asking you to look after the house is too..."

"A-Ah, it's not like that..."

Concerning Haruko's doubt, Yoshino seemed to be somewhat incoherent. Although she wished to explain properly, Yoshino couldn't find the right words to do so and thus resulted in that awkward situation.

As for Natsumi, in order to calm Yoshino down, she tenderly placed her hands on her shoulders.

"Natsumi-san...?"

"...It's fine, wait for a little while."

Natsumi then walked out of the room, leaving Yoshino alone.

After a few seconds, a girl entered the bedroom through the door into which Natsumi had disappeared.

Everybody had believed that it was Natsumi who had returned—but this proved to be false.

"Oh! Otou-san—, Okaa-san—, welcome back!"

"...! Koto-chan!?"

"Kotori!?"

Haruko and Tatsuo couldn't refrain from calling out to the girl. With white

ribbons, which tied her red hair into a pair of ponytails, and rounded eyes, she was undoubtedly Haruko's and Tatsuo's cherished daughter, Itsuka Kotori.

"Come on, you were at home? You should have appeared sooner."

"Sorry—, I was busy. Anyway, didn't I let my friends look after the house?"

Kotori let out an innocent look.

Despite their circumstances being unclear ever since they came back, the couple was relieved to see that their familiar daughter was there.

"Un... we're home, Koto-chan."

"Aah, it's been a while, Kotori. Forgive us for not being able to return during your birthday."

Tatsuo arduously and unhurriedly uprighted himself in order to embrace his daughter, and he extended his arms forward.

Watching the scene caused Haruko to feel extremely relaxed. Every time they returned to their home country, those two would always shout 'Kotori—!' and 'Otou-san—!' to each other and participate in a mutual bear hug, which developed the ever so growing rapport between them.

However.

"W-W-What are you doing!?"

In the split second before Tatsuo proceeded to hug her, Kotori's cheeks flushed bright red, and she gave Tatsuo's abdomen a powerful kick with her leg.

As the humongous onigiris had induced the swelling of his belly, Tatsuo could only yell 'Ugaah!' in a crestfallen manner when faced with the sudden attack.

"T-Tatsu-kun!? Koto-chan! What are you doing to your father! Don't you two always hug each other when we come home?"

"...! Ah, no, this, that..."

Hearing Haruko's words, Kotori froze up as if her previous kick was an instinctive reaction.

"G-Guuu..."

Tatsuo muffled his mouth using his hands with all his strength in order to restrain his vomiting reflex. The person between Tatsuo and Kotori, Yoshino, then opened her mouth to speak.

“P-Please wait a moment; I’ll go get some medicine...”

Yoshino departed from the room, accompanied by the pitter-patter of small footsteps.

“T-That...”

Kotori, being left behind, put on an embarrassed face and looked over to Tatsuo.

“I’m sorry, Otou-san—. I got shocked since it was too sudden...”

“No, it’s my fault.”

After he successfully controlled his overwhelming impulse to vomit, Tatsuo gave her a debilitated smile.

“Kotori’s fourteen years old now... she’s not a child anymore. Sob... Sob... I knew this day would come. Daddy’s fine...”

“T-Tatsu-kun...”

“Don’t worry... Eh... Why does everything look so blurry now...”

Tatsuo raised his head and gazed towards the ceiling to prevent his tears from flowing out.

Being able to see her father in such a heartbroken state, it was the first time since Kotori stopped taking a bath together with him and when he was seen through his Santa Claus disguise a few years ago.

“No, um, it’s not like that.”

Kotori scratched her cheek with a discombobulated expression.

Just then, the sounds of clumsy footsteps were transmitted through the hallway.

Following closely, Yoshino entered the room while carrying a glass of water and a medicinal pill using a tray.

“T-Thank you for waiting...”

『Yoshinon has arrive—guh!』

The rabbit hand-puppet and Yoshino said so in concert. As a result of clasping the tray in its mouth, Yoshinon’s ventriloquial voice became somewhat obscured.

What consummate skill .

“Hyaa!”

However, owing to her being too flustered, Yoshino’s foot slipped halfway through her path, and the tray in her hands fluttered in midair as the tablets scattered all over the floor.

“Uahh!?”

The pure liquid contained in the glass splashed onto Haruko.



“Haa... Haa... really... I need to hurry or else...”

Shidou heavily panted for oxygen as he scampered down the road leading to his house.

After expending tremendous effort and strength, Shidou finally managed to prevail on the harassing Tonomachi, who had been pestering him like a pest. Though in reality, the specific method Shidou had resorted to was bribing the guy with a crab leg he fished out from his shopping bag. In spite of that being the case, the seesaw battle in which he had vied with Tonomachi had accomplished no more than greatly enlarging the distance between Shidou and his home, along with prolonging the already lengthy travel time de rigueur.

“Why now of all times?”

This very beleaguered predicament chased Shidou everywhere to the ends of

the world, as if the malicious vixen Lady Luck had set her bewitching eyes on poor Shidou. What chance did he stand against preordained fate? The almighty gods were likely convulsed with uproarious laughter as they despaired Shidou's pathetic plight.

Yet he adamantly refused to renounce and abandon all grounds for hope. If Shidou were to cease his enervated pacing, the Spirits' unintentionally maleficent verbalizations would indisputably smash his parents like endless blows.

For Shidou, who had been variously misunderstood by many of his classmates and neighbors in virtue of Ratatoskr's rather unwarranted assistance, the last thing he wished to occur was being misapprehended by his own parents.

The foster parents that Shidou admiringly respected from the bottom of his heart had raised him up with care to be a fine young man. They have faith in him.

Shidou *had to* prevent them at all costs from viewing him as some sex criminal whose eclectic strike zone spanned from girls who were older than him to girls who were younger than his age.

No, they would probably comprehend Shidou's actions. Even if they had misheard of their son's history as a philanderer, Shidou's parents wouldn't pelt him with a farrago of pained reproaches or condemn him for the rest of his life. At most, they would in all likelihood wear dumbstruck faces and say, "Haha... I- Is that so?

Shidou *is* a boy, after all. But you mustn't neglect those girls, kay?" or something similar.

However, considering the fact that Spirits were hidden existences, Shidou also couldn't elaborate on that side of the debate. If worse became worst, Haruko and Tatsuo would return to the United States while harboring the concerned notion in their minds that their son had turned into a playboy. Shidou had absolutely no idea on what kind of mien he would feign when he confronted his parents in the future.

"If I don't hurry back..."

Shidou extruded his voice from his throat, accelerating the speed at which he trotted a step further.

At that moment.

“...!”

Shidou abruptly stepped on the brakes.

A few meters in front of him, Shidou could discern the figures of three exceedingly familiar girls.

From left to right, standing abreast according to the sequence of their respective heights and sharing the same age as him, their names were Yamabuki Ai, Hazakura Mai, and Fujibakama Mii - the renowned trio of Shidou's class.

Frankly, the situation incorporated merely his classmates walking together in front of him. Running past them would do.

However, for some reason, there lingered an ominous premonition that relentlessly irked him to avoid such an encounter and being seen.

“...”

Shidou silently shifted gears and began to make his way in another direction while muting the sounds of his footsteps. Although it would consume a little more time, taking a slight detour would lead to the same path towards his house.

In that instant...

“Hoho! Father, what eerie sinisterness!”

“What's the matter, Kitarou?”¹

“Ah! Back there! Itsuka-kun is walking down the street as if he has done some shameful deed!”

『What!?』

The trio turned their heads one after another, scaring Shidou til his shoulders trembled.

“Kuh...!”

“Ah! He’s escaping!”

1. Ge no Kitarō (ゲゲゲの鬼太郎) is a manga series created in 1960 by Shigeru Mizuki. It is best known for its popularization of the folklore creatures known as yōkai,

“Ignominious fiend!”

“Children! Assemble, assemble!”

Ai, Mai, and Mii rotated their bodies about with quick reaction speeds and pursued the fleeing Shidou. Shidou couldn’t help but raise his voice and yell as he heard the supersonic paces behind his back.

“Why the hell are you three chasing me!!!”



“...Aah—...”

Haruko simultaneously listened to the reverberations of her voice which echoed off the wall and sunk her body deeper under the tranquil surface of the liquid contained in the bathtub.

She had been previously splashed with a hefty volume of water due to Yoshino losing her footing accidentally. In order to prevent her body from catching a cold, Haruko was invited to partake in a warm bath.

In any case, her body had already been drenched in perspiration due to the strenuous sequence of events which had occurred, so she willingly accepted the invitation. On the other hand, Haruko had also spent quite some vitality in consoling Yoshino, who persistently kept apologizing and saying sorry with tears welling up in her rueful eyes.

“Even so...”

Those kids, who are they, really.

Haruko gazed attentively at the water droplets which gradually condensed onto the ceiling while thinking so.

From their apparent ages, Yoshino and Natsumi could be said to be Kotori's friends, but the other girls seemed to be senior high school students of the same age group as Shidou no matter how she looked at them.

Of course, she could not exclude the possibility of the whole fiasco being Shidou's doing, regardless of how minuscule. However, for that Shidou who had never brought a *girlfriend* home before, to invite that many girls to the house all of a sudden, let alone the fact that they all had dazzling looks, was nearly impossible.

But if that were the case, what could be the source of Shidou's perturbed dismay during their call? It hadn't been to thwart the fated meeting between the couple and those girls, had it? That prospect was too wild and full of reverie. Haruko could not refrain from dispelling such a notion from the essences of her mind.

"...Then."

Nevertheless, although she didn't intend to question Shidou, if that usually bashful boy had truly made a girlfriend, it was extremely happy news to Haruko.

However, leaving such a dubious and abstruse affair alone was rather unbecoming of Haruko's style of work. Hence she firmly decided to do a thorough and careful investigation to ascertain Shidou's speculative relationship with those esoteric girls, along with Kotori's as well .

Haruko set her mind and intended to rise from the bathtub.

Just as she was about to get out, the bathroom door was instantaneously opened, and the twin sisters who had previously apprehended Tatsuo and her ambled into the room with only towels covering their bodies.

"Yamai shall be joining!"

"Appearance!"

"W-What's going on?"

Despite the fact the fact that they were of the same gender, having people

burst into the room while one was taking a bath would almost always frighten him or her. Haruko instinctively braced her own body.

Thus the twin sisters—their names were, if she recalled correctly, Kaguya and Yuzuru. As for why they had specially posed before they spoke, Haruko hadn't the slightest clue.

"Kuku... Permit me to cleanse thy sins that have accumulated over innumerable voyages."

"Translation. Please let Yuzuru and Kaguya wash your back."

"A-Ah..."

Rather than consenting, Haruko was overwhelmed by the twins' imposing momentum and nodded her head. So, the Yamai sisters let Haruko sit on a chair and started to rub soap on their hands.

Afterwards, the two sat behind Haruko and alternately washed her back.

"Kaka. How is our, Yamais', combined skill, Heavenly Revolving Water Dragons?

Let thyself be immersed in this pleasure!"

"Confirmation. Does it tickle?"

"Ahh... Un, it's fine."

Having her back cleaned by someone else indeed pleased Haruko. But in the end, Haruko let out an unfathomable expression as she pondered why the two girls were washing her back. She perplexedly scratched her cheek.

Observing Haruko's reaction, Kaguya and Yuzuru quietly whispered.

"Hmm, why doesn't she look very happy? Is this not the ultimate hospitality?"

"Assent. Instead, she appears to be rather confused."

"How odd. If it were Shidou, he would be exhilarated even though he'd shy away."

"Deliberation. Perhaps it is due to the gender disparity. It could be effective against his father."

"Un... but how should I put it, it feels a little out of place to do it with a man other than Shidou."

"Agreement. Same here."

"Plus, for Miku, she'd feel pleasure if it were a girl who cleansed her."

"Contemplation. Could it be that we had mistaken the method?"

"Oh, you may be right. Then let's try *that*. If we do this from behind..."

"Understanding. The *fondling* move. But wouldn't that be too difficult for Kaguya?"

"Eh, what do you mean?"

"Explanation. If it were Kaguya, before touching your chest, one would bump against his or her chin."

"Don't take me as a fool. Even though they're small..."

"Proposal. In that case, begin simultaneously from left and right sides."

"As I desired. One, two..."

"W-Wait a moment."

If the silence were to resume, Haruko would probably enter a new world of rapture, so she hastily stopped the two.

But prior to that, Haruko noticed something even more desperately serious within the twins' dialogues. While leaking cold sweat, she faced the two girls one after the other.

"About that... Did you two say something about Shii-kun... Shidou just now?"

Being asked directly, Kaguya and Yuzuru couldn't help but blink a few times and noted their heads.

"Hm, said we did."

"Confirmation. Is there something wrong?"

"No, it's just that... the two of you said that you bathed together with Shii-kun or something similar."

Haruko enquired curiously. The two girls, having observed Haruko's response,

let out befuddled expressions as if they had spoken something which was not supposed to be spoken.

“U-Uh, the sins have been fully cleansed!”

“Approval. Yuzuru and Kaguya should depart about now.”

“W-Wait a minute!”

In spite of Haruko’s verbal exclamation, the Yamai sisters had already taken to their heels and exited the bathroom in a flurry.



“Well then...”

Ever since Haruko had entered the bathroom thirty minutes ago, Tatsuo had been lying down continuously throughout the time and slowly sat up after his stomach had felt slightly better than before.

“Ah... Is everything okay now?”

『Don’t overexert yourself.』

Yoshino and Yoshinon asked in a worried manner, having been looking after Tatsuo at the bedside ever since his stomach started hurting.

“Un, it’s thanks to the medicine Yoshino-chan had given me.”

“A-Ah...”

Hearing Tatsuo’s reply, Yoshino couldn’t help but feel extremely apologetic and shrink her shoulders. Even though Tatsuo didn’t imply anything else, Yoshino was presumably still sulking over her previous failure. What a kindhearted girl.

Tatsuo put on a smile in order to signify that he didn’t mind and stood up, walking downstairs.

“...Where are... you going?”

The girl who had forgotten to add an honorific and was standing beside Yoshino was undoubtedly Natsumi. Just as Kotori had said that she remembered she had a certain errand to run and departed, Natsumi had entered the room as if she had substituted for Kotori.

“Aah. Haru-chan should be done soon, and I’ve got to prepare a change of clothes.”

“Let me do it in that case!”

After Yoshino offered so, Tatsuo waved his hand in refusal.

“I’m grateful for that, but it’s fine, and Haru-chan doesn’t like to carry any luggage during trips. Today, we only brought the necessary clothes, so our pajamas are at home. Although it’s still a bit early, I’m thinking whether to grab a change of clothes from Shidou’s room or not.”

『Then, let Yoshinon lead the way!』

Yoshinon beckoned and eagerly said so.

“I see then, I’ll leave that to you.”

They were at the Itsuka residence. As the owner of the house, there was no way that Tatsuo didn’t know the location of Shidou’s room. But he simply grinned and kept nodding his head. After all, it was a kind gesture from the two girls, and Tatsuo had no reason to decline.

“T-This way...”

“...Un.”

Yoshinon and Natsumi showed the way and guided Tatsuo out of the room and up the stairs. Tatsuo followed the two’s tiny figures and ascended to the second floor.

“P-Please go ahead.”

“...Here we are.”

“Un, thank you.”

Tatsuo then pushed the door to Shidou’s room open.

Despite the perennial period of time wherein Tatsuo had never set foot in his

son's bedroom, there wasn't much of a difference between its current state and how he remembered the room. It was probably due to Shidou's scrupulously meticulous nature that the place neatly tidied up and cleaned on a regular basis.

To tell the truth, Shidou's room was even more spotlessly unblemished and pristine than Tatsuo's and Haruko's place in the United States. Tatsuo made a wry smile and began to unveil the wardrobe.

"Hm? This is..."

Initially intending to search for a plain shirt, Tatsuo abruptly spotted a certain item and halted his movements.



"Ahh... really, what are those people up to?"

After painstakingly breaking away from the extemporaneous trio, Ai, Mai, and Mii, Shidou finally heaved a sigh of relief and wiped the sweat on his forehead off with the sleeve of his shirt.

In spite of the current season being winter, the previous pursuit had rendered Shidou bereft of his cool sangfroid and caused his perspiration to permeate throughout his entire body.

To be precise, it was the anxious consternation and foreboding of having his diminishing reserve of time elapse as he hastily fled that had evinced an even more impactfull repercussion on his burdened conscience.

"I'm so dead... If this goes on, things will only get worse. Where in the world am I though?"

While continuing his demoralizing talk, Shidou surveyed his surroundings. He appeared to have gotten himself lost in an unfamiliar area during his last-ditch attempt to elude the menacing trio.

"Anyway, I should go back to the main road first."

Although his sense of direction was thrown into disarray, walking in the right or wrong way was much better than standing motionless. Shidou faintly adjusted his respiration and started to escalate his speed.

However, after running not even a few hundred meters, Shidou ceased his sprint.

"..."

Naturally, Shidou knew that now was not the time for that. But at the moment, an attraction-drawing act was being performed in the narrow alley to his left.

Shidou couldn't know more about the girl presently standing there. She had long pitch-black hair, Blanc de chine skin, and extensive fringes which covered her left eye. Bearing a seductive, beguiling smirk on her pale face, she lackadaisically stood perched there.

—Tokisaki Kurumi. The {Worst Spirit} emerged in front of Shidou.

She was maintaining a forward-leaning posture while staring face to face with a ferocious feline which perfectly mirrored the femme fatale herself.

"I've found you at last. So you're the boss of this street—Toramaru-san, I presume?"

Kurumi extended her hand with a dauntless expression, engendering a deterring growl from the cat known as Toramaru.

"Hihi... As expected, common plan won't work against you. That's why it's even more amusing, isn't it?"

As she taunted, Kurumi unfolded the sack held in the palm of her hand and sprinkled its contents all over the ground. It seemed to be some sort of cat food.

Toramaru gently swayed its ears, cautiously approached the bait and began to munch on the crunchy bites.

However, after a few seconds, the now plump Toramaru started to rock back and forth as if it was drunk and finally collapsed onto the ground with its

defenseless belly exposed.

"Hihihihihihihihih! You've fallen into my trap. This special cat food was infused with cat powder!"¹

Kurumi simultaneously cackled in a loud volume and bent her waist in order to gently caress Toramaru's soft belly. The creature also issued a comfortable purr that was completely different from before.

"Hihihihih! With this, I have defeated each and every powerful boss of this street.

All the cats are now—"

At that moment, she must've perceived a line of sight from behind her back.

Kurumi suddenly turned her body around.

Her eyes met Shidou's.

"..."

"..."

Both parties remained silent and uncommunicative for a few seconds.

"...Shidou-san. How long have you been there?"

"I-It's not what you think! I was just passing by coincidence, so..."

1. Also known as actinidia polygama, it is a non toxic plant that elicits an euphoric response in cats

Somehow, a devilish presentiment warned him not to loiter there any longer.

Hence, Shidou hurriedly pretended to be unaware of anything and decided to leave the scene at once.

In a split second, his shoulders were tightly grasped by someone and Shidou was coerced to stop in his tracks.

"You've got the wrong idea!"

Kurumi utilized a calm voice to say so. No, it was calm to an abnormal extent.

"If someone misunderstands, I'll be very displeased. Things aren't like what you're thinking, Shidou-san."

“Eh? No, I didn’t say, I don’t know anything...”

“Is it possible that Shidou-san is thinking I’m someone who would rely on adding cat powder in pet food to influence all the kitties in this street and plans to establish the Cat Sanctuary - Tokisaki Kingdom - or something like that?”

“No, that, I haven’t thought that far yet...”

“But that’s incorrect, it’s absolutely false. I will explain to you the reasons behind my doings from beginning to end, so you must listen properly, okay?”

“A-About that, Kurumi?”

Although Shidou had invariably raised his voice, Kurumi was already in a delusional trance where nothing could be audible to her ears.



Haruko mildly wiped her wet hair with a dry towel while exiting the bathroom.

“...”

Nonetheless, the current Haruko had an intricately complicated expression painted on her face. Even though the encumbrances of the trip had already been alleviated by soaking in the warm bath, the vestigial doubts and suspicions gnawing at her heart exponentially proliferated instead.

“...For God’s sake, what did Shii-kun really do when we weren’t at home...?”

Haruko couldn’t help but soliloquize in low murmurs as she was extraordinarily bothered by what the Yamai sisters had said in the bathroom.

Certainly, no matter how much she fretfully worried, her concern meant naught if she didn’t enquire Shidou, the person himself, directly.

With that resolve in her mind, Haruko entered the living room and noticed her husband sitting on the sofa.

However, Haruko perceived a sort of indisposition emanating from him. Like her, Tatsuo had adopted a sophisticated expression as well.

“Tatsu-kun?”

“Ahh, Haru-chan... How was your bath?”

“Un, pretty relieving. Anyway, thanks for the clothes, Tatsu-kun.”

Haruko stretched Shidou’s shirt which she had borrowed and was wearing. As for her previous set of clothes and undergarments, Haruko had already thrown them into the laundry basket.

“Aah... yeah.”

However, for some reason, when Haruko had mentioned Shidou’s clothes just now, a dubious expression had surfaced on Tatsuo’s face for a moment.

“Is something wrong?”

“Un, actually...”

Tatsuo appeared to have something he wanted to say to her.

But before that.

“I didn’t expect for there to be a second time for the {[Salon do Miku]}.”

An extremely vigorous voice resounded in the living room, abruptly erupting into Haruko’s and Tatsuo’s conversation.

1. A reference to the same Salon she made for Natsumi in Volume 9.

Confounded towards the direction from which the voice came, the couple ultimately caught sight of the girl with a gorgeous figure—Miku. Not only that, but the two felt as if they had seen her somewhere before, even though it was their first meeting.

“Now then, Darling’s Oto-sama and Okaa-sama. You two must be super worn out after such a long flight.”

“D-Darling?”

Although the flabbergasted Haruko yelled so, Miku continued like she paid no heed to the sudden remark.

"You won't have to worry now that I'm here. I'll use the perfect massage to ease your fatigue."

As she finished her welcoming words, Miku clapped her hands a couple of times.

Afterwards, the girl who had made the onigiris - Tohka - poked her head out from behind Miku. She really conferred the impression of a pet dog.

"Alright, let me massage Ocaa-sama while you take care of Otou-sama, Tohka."

"Umu, understood."

"Remember, you only need to lightly knock on the back. Don't use your full strength. If you do, Otou-sama's shoulders will break."

"Muu, okay."

"I think I heard something real bad..."

Seeing cold sweat bead atop Haruko's forehead, Tatsuo gently grinned.

"Saa saa~, Otou-sama, please head over that way. As for Ocaa-sama, just lie down on the sofa and relax."

"Eh? A-Ah..."

Although she still had a few words left for Tatsuo, Haruko could only recline on the couch under Miku's hastening.

Miku then immediately started flexing her fingers and massaged Haruko's back.

"Ara, your body is really stiff."

"Un..."

Haruko had no alternative but to slacken her muscles. Despite the person exaggerating herself a bit, Miku's massage was indeed that of a skilled professional.

"How's the pressure?"

"Un... it's... really... good..."

Not too weak yet not too strong, an exquisitely perfect balance of force stimulated the acupuncture points in the shoulders and on the back. The laborious toil of work and travel was thus easily soothed and palliated. An evolving drowsiness gradually assaulted Haruko little by little.

However.

"Hehe, hehehehe... a mature woman's body isn't bad... this excellent softness..."

"...?!"

As Miku became more and more aroused, Haruko fell into a light nap at last.



"really... what did I do to deserve being tossed into these horrible circumstances...?"

After being forced to undergo an elucidating series of tangled delineations and complicated exegeses by Kurumi, Shidou extricated himself from her iniquitous clutches at long last.

In spite of Kurumi still having it in her to keep sermonizing to Shidou infinitely, the cat which had taken a tiny munch of the intoxicating cat powder had somehow regained consciousness and fled. Therefore, she had no choice but to chase after the escaping feline.

Ever since then, Shidou had walked for an indefinite period of time until he arrived at a known street.

Even though it had already been over an hour since he received the call from his parents, perhaps Shidou could still overtake his doomed fate in their race against time. He clung onto this thread-like ray of hope and set foot on the road leading towards his home once more.

Just then...

“Hm?”

The moment Shidou thought so, a group of primary school students appeared before him. They seemed to be playing hide and seek, looking back time and again, and then running away with a shriek.

After a while passed, the person who was seeking for the children emerged. As to who that person was, Shidou had a deep impression. A foreign girl with blonde hair and blue eyes as her characteristic traits, she was dressed in black formalwear which made her stand out from the local residents like a square peg in a round hole.

“Wha...”

Catching sight of those unmistakable features, Shidou couldn’t refrain from holding back his breath.

But such an effect was inevitable, on account of the fact that the person standing in front of him was a Wizard from DEM Industries, an organization antagonistic to Ratatoskr — Ellen Mira Mathers.

“Hurry up, we’re over here!”

“You’re too slow, Onee-san!”

“You can’t be the strongest like this!”

“That, it’s because of...”

Hearing the primary school students’ exclamations, Ellen gnawed at her teeth, unreconciled.

“Ah...”

Ellen suddenly suppressed the pit of her stomach and crouched on the ground.

Supposedly shocked, the pupils rushed to Ellen’s side with looks of worry on their faces.

“A-Are you okay?”

“Where does it hurt?”

“Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“——Not a chance!”

At that moment, Ellen instantly lifted her head up and seized one of the students'

shoulders.

The primary school students were all utterly startled and widened their eyes in astonishment, only to expose discontented expressions afterwards.

“Eh, that’s so cheating.”

“No fair.”

“This one doesn’t count.”

“Hm, what are you talking about? In the rules initially set, the first person to be touched by the ghost will become the next ghost. It doesn’t say anything about being deceived because you were too foolish.”

Ellen complacently stated, but the kid who had previously been touched assumed an X-shaped gesture with his hands in front of his chest.

“But I made a shield just now, so your touch didn’t work!”

“Wha... a shield!? Does something like that even exist?”

“If you make a shield, ghosts can’t touch you.”

“Onee-san, didn’t you know that?”

“I’ve never heard of such a rule before. I question that, and if I put on my Realizer unit, regardless of what shield you have, you’ll all be...”

It was then that Ellen noticed the guy soundlessly standing a short distance away from her, Shidou.

“Ah...”

“...”

Ellen blushed furiously.

Seeing her reacting like that, Shidou couldn’t help but identify the exact same hostile sensation which he has experienced again and again that day and take a run for it.

“W-Wait a moment, Itsuka Shidou! Don’t misunderstand! This is just—waa!”

“Onee-san fell down!”

“Is everything fine?”

Completely ignoring and having no regard for the laments which came from behind him, Shidou picked up speed instead.



“Hah... Hah... What’s the matter with that girl?”

Having struggled free of Miku’s surprise attack, Haruko straightened out her disheveled hair and heaved a sigh.

“Everything okay there, Tatsu-kun?”

“Aah, yeah. It actually felt a little ticklish since it was too careful.”

Watching Tatsuo form a wry smile and stroked his shoulders, Haruko couldn’t help but exhale a deep breath.

“That isn’t too bad... Anyway, what did you want to say just now?”

“Eh? Ahh...”

Tatsuo fumbled his chin as if he had recollected something crucial.

“Honestly, even I have no idea on what it means. Granted that Shidou has something like that in his room, I don’t know why he would even have it in his possession.”

“Eh? What are you talking about?”

Haruko tensed up towards Tatsuo’s shady statement.

“What do you mean by ‘it’? C-Could it be... it’s those rumored dangerous drugs?! ”

“Ahh, nothing of that sort. It’s just that...”

“That?”

“Un... when I was searching for your change of clothes inside the wardrobe in Shidou’s room...”

Tatsuo said so with a subtle expression.

At that moment.

“Otou-sama, Okaa-sama.”

Another girl made her appearance in front of them, cutting their dialogue short once again.

“Nn!!”

“Wa!!”

Haruko and Tatsuo uttered sad calls, toppling backwards at the same time.

But that was nothing out of the ordinary, owing to the fact that the girl who had emerged before them was the one who had previously threatened Tatsuo with a knife.

“Forgive me for the late greeting; the other girls have troubled you much.”

“N-No... it’s fine.”

Although Haruko had thought of saying something like ‘You’ve been the most troublesome’, she endured the urge for the sake of their safety.

The girl then utilized the most formal etiquette and knelt before Haruko and Tatsuo, bowing her head afterwards.

“Allow me to introduce myself, as it is our first meeting. I am currently in a relationship with Shidou, and my name is Tobiichi Origami.”

“Ah, I’m very pleased to meet you... Eh? Ehh!?”

Hearing news which possessed such a heavy impact all of sudden, Haruko involuntarily broadened her two eyes.

“W-Wait a minute. You said that you were in a relationship... you and Shidou!?”

“That is correct.”

Origami emotionlessly nodded her head with a blank face. Seeing the girl's demeanor, Haruko and Tatsuo couldn't refrain from sending each other a momentary glance. Due to the fact that the couple had never discussed such a topic with Shidou, the two weren't well-informed about what type of girl their son fancied. Nevertheless, they had never expected him to be suddenly interested in this type of girl.

Observing Haruko's and Tatsuo's doubtful looks, Origami fished out a number of photographs from her bosom.

"Here is the evidence."

"T-This is..."

Haruko and Tatsuo were compelled to view the pictures she handed over.

The photographs indeed revealed a group photo of Origami and Shidou together.

"Ara?"

However, Haruko noticed something amiss among the photos instead.

"A-About that, Origami-chan?"

"Yes."

'This picture... even though it does display two people, aren't their positions a bit strange? It's as if this is a selfie with Shidou as the background, don't you think so?"

"That is a misconception."

"Then this one... why does it feel like that Shidou isn't looking towards the camera lens? It resembles a frame of two people coincidentally side by side which was taken by a hidden camera..."

"That is a misconception too."

"...I-Is that so..."

Perspiration exuded out of Haruko's forehead as she listened to Origami's unwavering denials. After performing a rough visual sweep of the remaining photographs, Haruko couldn't help but discern that each of them possessed an

unnatural sensation within their contents.

“...Hm?”

Once her eyes locked onto a certain picture, Haruko furrowed her eyebrows.

“Haru-chan, what’s wrong?”

Detecting the change in Haruko’s air, Tatsuo asked so.

“Un, something unimportant... This *is* Shidou, right?”

“Eh? Which one?”

Just as Tatsuo was about to glimpse at the picture held in Haruko’s hand, a piece of paper appeared out of nowhere, obscuring the photograph. The culprit was -

without a doubt - Origami.

“O-Origami-chan?”

“Please look at this.”

“This is...?”

Haruko couldn’t help but follow the girl’s directions.

“Eh? A marriage application!?”

Origami had proposed a marriage application where the information regarding the bride’s side had already been filled out. But that wasn’t all to it, as Origami pressed the couple to quickly sign the document, which had a red mark on the witnesses’

column.

“According to Japanese law, Shidou-kun is unable to get married yet. Thus, when he reaches the age of eighteen, I would like Otou-sama and Okaa-sama to be our witnesses.”

“W-Wait a bit, suddenly proposing marriage... What does Shidou think about this?”

“He was the first to make the offer. He said that the both of you are indispensable.”

Origami slightly blushed. Haruko and Tatsuo couldn't help but widen their eyes at the sight.

"I-Is this real?"

"For Shidou to... take the initiative."

"Yes, and he also pulled the flustered me in for a passionate kiss."

" " Wha...!!" " 1

Hearing of this out of the blue conduct which was totally unlike of Shidou, the couple was seriously alarmed. However, when they saw the committed solemnity in Origami's earnest face, the two were unable to detect any hint of dishonesty from the girl.

While Haruko and Tatsuo had their minds blown away, Origami passed the marriage application document to the couple.

"I shall repeat my request—please leave Shidou-kun to me."

"T-This..."

"Even if you say that..."

In response to the unduly outrageous actress' script, Haruko and Tatsuo had only the strength to issue perplexed utterances.

Just then...

"Hey! What do you think you're doing on your own, Tobiichi Origami?!"

As the door to the living room was crashed open, the girls, led by Tohka entered one after another.

"This isn't what we agreed on! It's supposed to be a welcoming!"

"This is my kind of welcoming. Is there anything more welcoming than a great event in your son's life?"

"What?!"

Tohka couldn't refrain from puckering up her eyebrows towards Origami's statement. Then, the rabbit puppet Yoshinon moved its hands excitedly.

1. Haruko and Tatsuo exclaim the same phrase simultaneously.

『Eh, then just let Yoshino become the bride.』

“W-What are you saying, Yoshinon...”

“Kuku, formidable philosophies, Yoshinon. As spoken, the candidates for marriage aren’t limited to thee.”

“Assent. I cannot concede even if it is Master Origami.”

“Exactly, exactly! Very sly indeed, Origami. Darling’s mine, so you should be my bride!”

“...No, that wouldn’t be weird at all ...”

Although Natsumi said so half-heartedly, the other girls were already past the point of no return.

“I’ll never leave Shidou to you!”

“A-As for me...”

『Yoshino won’t surrender too!』

“Kaka, All’s fair in love and war! I admire thy courage, but Shidou is already...”

“Challenge. Shidou is Yuzuru’s and Kaguya’s shared property already.”

“I have an idea for that~! Why don’t you all become my wives!”

“...I’m fine with anything...”

“W-Wait a moment...”

“Calm down everyone—”

Despite their desperate attempts to restore order, Haruko and Tatsuo were unable to breach the girls’ deafened ears.



“F-Finally... I’m here...”

Unaware of how much time had passed since he received the call , Shidou returned to his long-lost family.

Due to the fact that he had been continuously running, Shidou's exhausted body was dead-beat even though it hadn't been long since he broke away from Ellen.

However, that was merely the end of the beginning. The real battle had just started. Shidou prepared his worn out mentality as he deepened his respiration.

Since he had not contacted either of them even once, Shidou had absolutely no idea as to what the Spirits and his parents had discussed. Therefore, he had to fabricate some sort of excuse for his relationship with the Spirits, and he could not utter the word *Spirit* even once.

“...Too difficult.”

Shidou couldn't help but wrinkle his eyebrows. It was obviously a matter of great importance, but he was unable to properly explain it. Shidou was stuck at a dead end.

Yet standing there improved nothing. Shidou firmed his resolution and entered the front door.

“I'm back——”

“—————”

Shidou's voice was entirely masked by the sounds coming from the living room. It looked like a lot of people were quarrelling with each other.

“Could it be...?”

A bad feeling erupted within Shidou's heart. He hastily removed his shoes and dashed inside.

Just before he opened the door, someone else did it for him. A man and woman came running out of the living room.

“Otou-san, Okaa-san.”

Shidou shouted instinctively. They were precisely the owners of the house - Itsuka Tatsuo and Itsuka Haruko.

“S-Shidou! Welcome back...”

“W-Wait a minute! Who in the world are those girls!? Talking about marriage all of a sudden...”

Haruko interrogated while pointing towards the living room.

Hearing that, Shidou couldn't refrain from looking towards the room. Inside, an intense dispute was currently going on, and it appeared to be one that wouldn't stop anytime soon.

“They're...”

Shidou pressed his forehead with his palm. Although he didn't know what had happened specifically, he was conscious of the fact that the girls hadn't left a satisfactory first impression in his parents' minds.

“...”

Not only could Shidou not mention anything about Spirits, but even if he did, there was no guarantee that they would believe him.

Shidou took a staunch stance and faced his parents.

“...Otou-sama, Okaa-sama, hear me out first.”

“...?”

“Shii-kun...?”

Seeing the seriousness in their son's face, Haruko and Tatsuo couldn't help but get serious as well.

With that said Shidou lightly nodded his head and continued.

“First of all... sorry for not telling you about them.”

“Don't worry about that... But who are they in relation to you?”

Hearing Haruko's question, Shidou could only bite his lip and shake his head.

“...Sorry, but I can't say anything... about that.”

“What, why not?”

“really... forgive me. I can't reveal anything no matter what. I know I'm being selfish, having received your kindness and care all this time, and that what I'm

doing is rather unfilially. But... please, don't hate them."

"Even if you say so..."

"Please, I'm begging you. Even if they did something very impolite, all of them are really good inside. Each... Each and every one of them... is very important to me!"

"S-Shii-kun..."

Haruko found herself at a loss, perplexed. Instead, at that moment, Tatsuo gently patted her shoulders.

"Tatsu-kun..."

"Isn't that fine too, Haru-chan? Shidou has spoken to this extent, so I think he's definitely not wrong."

"B-But..."

Seeing Haruko's face full of hesitation, Tatsuo put on a warm smile.

"Also, hearing my son speak like that, I'm a bit happy too."

"Happy...?"

"Since requesting something like that, for Shidou, is a first."

"Ah..."

Haruko instantly understood the significance behind those words. She looked towards the both of them and tidied her hair.

"...You two are really hopeless. well , if you can't talk about it, then I guess it's fine... But in the future, you need to tell us properly."

"...Okaa-san!"

"...You've already gone this far. As parents, how can we not trust our own son?"

Haruko bashfully averted her glance as she said so, while slightly resembling her daughter Kotori.

"...?"

Just then, as if he noticed something afoot, Shidou abruptly raised his head.

Apparently, the verbal war occurring in the living room had ended in a ceasefire some time ago.

Attempting to have a glimpse of the situation in the room, Shidou observed that all the Spirits were staring at him with fixed gazes.

It seemed like his previous pleading speech had reached their ears. Shidou's cheeks couldn't help but redden in a blush.

"...Ahh, sorry to have disturbed you. I was just a little emotional, that's all ."

Suddenly, a familiar sound came from behind.

Shidou hurriedly turned his head, only to find his sister, Kotori, leaning against the wall ever since God knows when.

"Kotori! When did you get there!?"

"Not long ago, I just arrived. I thought something big had happened because the house was so noisy—Welcome back, Oto-san, Okaa-san."

Kotori waved her hand towards Haruko and Tatsuo. However, the couple shook their heads in astonishment.

"Welcome back...?"

"Didn't we just meet each other some time ago?"

"Eh?"

Listening to her parents, Kotori couldn't refrain from broadening her two eyes.

Nonetheless, that moment of disbelief instantly disappeared when she spotted Natsumi. The girl in question quickly hid behind Yoshino in response.

"...Well , no matter. Anyway, I'll explain everything from the beginning first..."

Kotori then pointed to Tohka and the others.



“—These girls are Spirits.”

Just like that, the real truth, which Shidou had risked his life to conceal, was completely divulged to his parents.

“Wha...! Kotori!”

Shidou forcibly yelled. But that couldn't be helped. The topic of Spirits was highly confidential, existences that could not be disclosed even to dear family members, thus was told to Shidou.

Yet the couple seemed to fathom those words.

“I-I see...”

“So that's how it is.”

The couple gave out indescribable, ineffable faces painted with comprehension.

“Hah...? W-What does this mean?”

Shidou was dumbfounded and looked alternately towards his parents along with Kotori.



A few minutes elapsed.

The Spirits had already returned to their mansion, and only a few people remained in the Itsuka residence.

“—Otou-san and Okaa-san are Ratatoskr's mechanical engineers!?”

Hearing the impactful news for the first time, Shidou couldn't help but lament.

“To be precise, they're employees of Asgard Electronics, the parent organization of Ratatoskr, and simultaneously the developers of Realizer units. The Fraxinus that we've always flown with was also developed by their team.”

From that perspective, you can say that airship is our sister.”

Kotori elaborated so while licking the treasured lollipop in her mouth. Tatsuo and Haruko, who were sitting beside her, nodded in agreement too.

“Eh, didn’t we tell you before?”

“And I thought you already knew~.”

“What do I know! If that’s true, why didn’t you notice that they were Spirits!?”

“Hmm, I guess it’s because that was our first time meeting any Spirits.”

“Yup, and since they’re called *Spirits*, we even thought that they were supposed to be tiny creatures.”

The couple burst into merry laughter, full of embarrassment. Shidou felt as if he lost all sense of reality in an instant as he watched his parents in such a state.

“Then what did I... suffer all that for...”

Shidou enormously sighed and lied down on the table; seeing him in that state only served to magnify the couple’s laughter.

“Well ... Anyhow, it’s good to see that Shidou can get along with Spirits.”

“Yeah, even though there were some misgivings from the start, there won’t be any more problems in that case.”

“Un, although arguments are bad, that shows how much those girls love Shidou.”

“But taking out a marriage proposal all of a sudden really did surprise me.”

Haruko and Tatsuo nodded together and said so in unison.

Shidou had no choice but to feel at ease and relieved after undergoing all those painstaking ordeals. No matter which process he took, Shidou was fully satisfied that his parents had accepted the Spirits.

However, at that moment...

“...About that, Shii-kun, it doesn’t have anything to do with that though...”

Haruko lowered her voice and fished out a certain photograph from inside her pocket.

“This is Shii-kun, right? ...What’s happened here?”

“Eh? This is...!?”

Shidou held his breath at the sight of the picture.

Of course, that was unavoidable. In that very photo, after putting on beautiful make-up, was Shidou’s female version, {Shiori-chan}.

“Where did you get this from...?!”

“A girl named Origami lent this to me. Then, who’s this?”

“No, this isn’t me! This is just someone from school who really resembles me!!”

Just as cold sweat flowed down from Shidou’s forehead while he feebly tried to explain, Tatsuo shouted as if something forgotten had come across his mind.

“Oh yeah, when I was looking for a change of clothes for Haru-chan, I found a girl’s uniform in your closet...”

“...?!”

Shidou widened his eyes in shock. Indeed, due to unavailability of storage, he had to place that uniform inside his wardrobe. He never expected someone else to discover it by chance.

“Shii-kun... how did that come about? We’re not angry or anything, but we’d like a reason at least. Is it some kind of hobby? Or maybe...”

“Yeah, Shidou. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I have an acquaintance that has the same fetish too. Even though society indeed won’t accept it entirely, you’re our son. We’ll share responsibility for your sufferings, kay?”

“I said it’s not what you think!!!!”

Beholding his father and mother misunderstanding everything, Shidou raised his voice and gave out a wail.



The End